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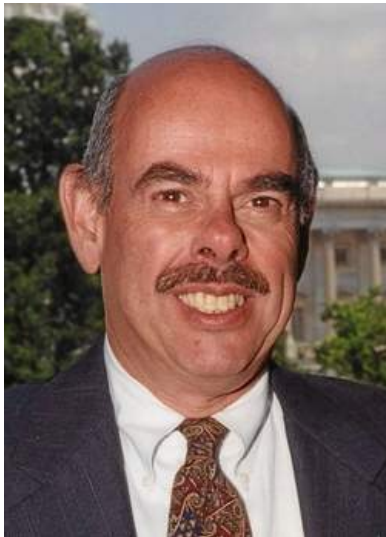
By Nick Green, Daily Breeze

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Rep. Henry Waxman's departure from Congress will be 'end of an era for progressive politics'



Los Angeles liberal firebrand Rep. Henry Waxman, a diminutive lawmaker with a giant record of congressional accomplishments ranging from clean air to health care, shocked the political establishment Thursday by announcing he will retire at year's end.

The exit of the influential 74-year-old veteran from his coastal district, a Democratic stronghold, will simultaneously reduce California's congressional clout while setting off a scramble among local Democrats for the coveted seat. Waxman represents the sprawling 33rd Congressional District, which stretches from San Pedro through the South Bay to parts of the San Fernando Valley.

"I have run my last campaign," Waxman said in a lengthy 3 1/2-page announcement, where he made clear his frustration with congressional inertia but denied that played a role in his decision. "It's time for someone else to have the chance to make his or her mark, ideally someone who is young enough to make the long-term commitment that's required for real legislative success."

Waxman, a blunt speaker who reveled in his pit bull reputation, did not mince words about what it will take for his successor to accomplish anything in an institution increasingly viewed as dysfunctional by Americans of all political stripes.

"There are elements of Congress today that I do not like," Waxman said. "I abhor the extremism of the Tea Party Republicans. I am embarrassed that the greatest legislative body in the world too often operates in a partisan intellectual vacuum."

"But I am not leaving out of a frustration with Congress," he added. "And I am not leaving because I think House Democrats have no chance to retake the House. House Republicans have no compelling vision for the future. The public understands this and I am confident that the Democrats can regain control."

Waxman joins a recent exodus of more than two dozen seasoned congressional representatives, many fed up with entrenched partisan immobility or swept away by a changing and deeply divided political climate. They have included former San Fernando Valley Rep. Howard Berman, who was defeated last year by Brad Sherman in the primary after serving 20

years in the House, and Democrat Rep. George Miller of Martinez, who announced in January he is stepping down after 40 years in Congress.

"The first thing I thought of was what a large vacuum of influence and leadership it will leave, particularly in the area of health care and the environment," said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a senior fellow at the School of Policy, Planning and Development at USC.

"That institutional memory is gone, that policy focus is gone, that closeness to the Democratic leadership is gone," she added. "California is losing significant clout in Congress."

Waxman reveled in his image as a short, bald, Jewish liberal and having a reputation for corporate grillings and legislative persistence that prompted former GOP Sen. Alan Simpson to describe him as "tougher than a boiled owl."

"It did take me by surprise," said former state legislator Sheila Kuehl, who is running for Los Angeles County supervisor. "Henry is younger than Jerry Brown so it's not an age thing. It's more of an inability to get anything done back there."

The political climate in the nation's capital today is very different from the optimism that saw Waxman first elected during the post-Watergate class of 1974 to represent a district based in West Los Angeles.

Over the next 20 terms in Congress, he chaired hearings in the 1990s that, in his words, "exposed the (tobacco) industry's duplicity" and in 2010 worked to ensure the passage of the landmark Affordable Care Act, a culmination of decades worth of work to expand health insurance for low-income people.

Waxman also was a champion of environmental causes, including a 1990 upgrade to air pollution laws, while in 2009 he co-wrote the only bill aimed at combating global warming to have passed the House. The legislation died in the Democrat-controlled Senate.

"His fingerprints are on every major piece of legislation affecting health, public health and water quality," said county Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, a close ally of Waxman. "His departure, along with that of Howard Berman last year, is an end of an era for progressive politics in this nation."

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti praised Waxman's "incredibly compassionate heart" and said his work was "profoundly impactful and (has) saved millions of lives."

South Bay state Sen. Ted Lieu, among those mentioned to replace Waxman, called him a "legend."

"Congressman Waxman set the platinum standard for representing the best interests of his constituents as well as the overall quality of life for Californians and our nation," Lieu said. "Congressman Waxman's remarkable leadership has made our nation a better place."

Staff Writer Rick Orlov and The Associated Press contributed to this article.